Academy Oral Histories Project

Interview with

Robert "Bob" Peck

Conducted by

Athina Filipos and Pedro Raposo

The Academy of Natural Sciences

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert “Bob” Peck

INTERVIEWERS: Athina Filipos, Pedro Raposo

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00:00:20

PECK: My name is Bob Peck, I am the senior fellow of the Academy of Natural Sciences, and I also have the title of Curator of Art and Artifacts. I’ve been here since 1976 and still enjoy coming in every day.

00:00:34

FILIPOS: So, Bob, you're the Curator of Art and Artifacts here at the Academy. How did you first become interested in natural sciences and wildlife art?

PECK: Well, I grew up in a family that was interested in everything to do with natural history. My father, [Frederick Peck,] was a landscape architect. My mother, [Matilda McCracken Peck,] was a botanist and loved birds. I can't call her an ornithologist, but she was certainly a birdwatcher. I grew up in Chestnut Hill [Philadelphia, PA], right on the edge of the Wissahickon Creek and Fairmount Park. And [I] was fortunate enough to be able to go to the Poconos [in northeast Pennsylvania, during] the summers. So I was immersed in natural history from a very early age. But I was also interested in everything to do with history. [E. Perot Walker,] my [sixth grade] teacher at Chestnut Academy, where I went to school, [who once worked in the Academy’s Botany Department and whose papers are in the Academy’s archives,] was both a birdwatcher, a plant expert, and an historian [with contagious enthusiasm for all of these subjects.]

[It was he, more than anyone I supposed, who can be credited with indoctrinating me in all of them.] [Of course,] the Academy of Natural Sciences combines all of those subjects, so, I feel very much at home here. I remember the Academy [and its public museum very well from my early childhood.] My parents used to bring me here as a child, but I also distinctly remember coming with a third or fourth grade class from school. [Our teachers and parental chaperones led] us around, as they always did, from one part of the building to the other.

I absolutely fell in love with the moose diorama. I was besotted by this giant creature and the wonderful landscape [that surrounded it]. [Our class must have started with the dioramas and] then went on to Dinosaur Hall and elsewhere around the building. In any case, at some point one of the teachers discovered that I wasn't with the class, and she got very worried and announced on the PA system that I was lost and everyone went rushing everywhere looking for me.

I wasn't lost at all. I knew exactly where I was. I was where I wanted to be in front of that moose diorama, still gazing into it. I never [imagined] that I would one day end up working in the very same building that I had fallen in love with at such a young age.

00:02:38

FILIPOS: So how did that then turn into experiencing science in your education in high school and college?

PECK: I was offered a lot of science during high school, and then when I was in college, I was going to major in biology or environmental studies at Princeton. That had been my goal. [But] when I got there, I found that the courses that were being offered were very technical and very specific. And also, at that point in the 1970s, quite focused on negative things about [the degradation of] the environment.

That was [about the time of the first] "Earth Day," and that whole [public push for environmental protection.] I found [what was being offered for study at Princeton was, to me,] a depressing, negative side of nature. I love nature for its beauty and diversity. And so, I decided that I wouldn't major in environmental studies [after all.] I ended up in Princeton's Department of Art [History] and Archeology, [taking] a minor in biology.

I did my graduate work in American cultural history at the Winterthur Museum, in [a program sponsored by] the University of Delaware [from which I received my MA in 1976 and which later awarded me an honorary doctorate in the humanities]. At one point, toward the end of my graduate studies there, I was at home [in Philadelphia] for a weekend, and I ran into Dr. Ruth Patrick, [the eminent limnologist and a pillar of the Academy of Natural Sciences.] She [and her husband (Charles Hodge)] had been friends of my parents. I'd grown up with her son, and we went to the same school [Chestnut Hill Academy].

So I'd known Dr. Patrick all my life. And she, in a typical Dr. Patrick way, said, "Bobby, what are you going to do with your life?" It was a great question. And I said, "Well, Dr. Patrick, I'm not sure. I know I want to work in a museum, but I don't know whether it

should be an art museum, a history museum, or a science museum, because I love all three of those subjects."

And she said, "Well, the Academy is the place you should come because we have all of those things." And sure enough, it's true. As the oldest natural history institution in the country, we have [a rich] history. We have a great art collection, and we certainly do science in spades. She said, "There is an opening at the moment. You might want to come in for an interview." I looked it up and found that, sure enough, there was an assistant to the director of the museum [position then open]. So, I got in touch, and I made an appointment, and came in for an interview. [That interview] had been planned for half an hour or so. [Fortunately,] I hit it off with the director [Chris Ray]. He and I spent an hour and a half talking about all kinds of shared interests.

A few days later, I was delighted when he called and offered me the position [as his assistant]. And in one sense, it's the only job interview I've ever had because I came in in the spring of 1976 and have been here ever since! I still love it here. [It has become my professional home.] I can't wait to get to work every day.

00:05:30

FILIPOS: So originally, what kind of work did you do here at the Academy?

PECK: Well, I came to work for the director of the museum, and so I [served as] the interface between the director and the education department and the exhibits department, and he would assign me to whatever projects were going on [that he thought needed extra help]. Over time, that role grew. I was then offered [from outside of the Academy] a position as the director of a study of the Bartram Trail, which was a 2400 mile trail that went all through the Deep South, and [for which] there had been a congressionally funded study to try to create a national hiking trail that would be the equivalent of the Appalachian Trail or the Pacific Crest Trail, but that would commemorate William Bartram's travels on the eve of the American Revolution.

[The Bartram Trail Conference, the organization charged with heading up the study,] called the Academy to see if we could recommend anyone for the position because William Bartram had been a member here and we had some of his papers in the archives. I happened to be the one who answered the phone and handled the question [that day,] as that was [often] one of my jobs. [At that time,] every time a strange question would come into the Academy, [it would be sent] to my phone, and then I would figure out who [should respond to the query]. [In this case,] I thought, well, that sounds like an interesting project,

[maybe I should answer it.] I'd known about [William] Bartram all of my life. I'd grown up with a garden that had a *Franklinia*, which is the tree that he and his father helped save from extinction when they discovered it in Georgia [in the 18th century].

And so, I knew Bartram and he was, of course, a Philadelphian. So, I thought, well, maybe I should go and interview for that position. And I did. I flew down to Atlanta, Georgia, had the interview, and then, [a few days later,] to my great surprise and delight, I was offered the job. I went back to the director of the museum [at the Academy] and I asked, "[Might it be possible for me] to take a leave of absence." He said, "Well, you've only been here for a year. We don't usually give leaves of absence." I said, "Yes, but this is such a great opportunity. [The director] said, "Well, I don't think I can do that, because I need you here. I mean, you have to make the choice. You're either going to do that, or you're going to stay at the Academy."

Somehow [news of] this filtered up to the president's office. That was then [Thomas] Peter Bennett. He said, "This sounds like a great [opportunity]." He had grown up in Florida, so he knew all about William Bartram and his travels there. He said, "This sounds like such an interesting project, and if the Academy can be involved in it in some way, creating a national hiking trail, why not? We should do this." So, he granted me the leave of absence, and off I went.

I spent a year living, actually, in Montgomery, Alabama, [as there had been] a bit of bait and switch. They interviewed me in Atlanta [and implied that that's where I would be working,] and I thought that would be a pretty glamorous city to be in. But at the last minute they said, "No, no, the headquarters is going to be in Montgomery, Alabama." This was back to the heart of the old South. George Wallace was still governor at that time. So, it was a very interesting experience. [The trail study] involved eight states, along Bartram's 2400 mile route. I had to produce a report explaining where Bartram had gone, what buildings existed that were from his time, and how [his travels] could be commemorated. [There is a copy of that report in the Academy's library.]

In the end, it worked out that the [federal] government couldn't afford to [build] a whole trail that would go through all those states. So, we broke it down into the [individual] states involved, and each of them created their own Bartram Trail. Some were more interesting than others. Some of them were hiking trails, some were horseback trails, some canoe trails, and so on...[and we created lots of road signs commemorating Bartram's travels].

When Bartram traveled, he was often [following Indian trails, many of which later became local roads or interstate highways. So, if you are driving through the Southeast today, you'll see lots of historic markers commemorating Bartram's travels]. Those are the results of the work that I did [between 1977 and 1978].

[Note: for a detailed account of the Bartram Trail project and my role in it, see The Attention of a Traveller: Essays on William Bartram's *Travels* and Legacy, Kathryn Braund, editor, Tuscaloosa, ALA: U of Alabama Press, 2022.]

[When] I came back to the Academy in 1978 […] [I was named] Special Assistant to the President. [Chris Ray had left while I was away, and the museum was being run by Dennis Wint. Peter Bennet was still the president.] That expanded my role at the Academy considerably. Before I had worked just in the public museum side with education and exhibits, but [when I was based] in the president's office, I was able to work with all the scientific departments […] and the library as well. And so, I got to know the Academy better and better with each passing month and year.

00:10:10

FILIPOS: While you were at the Academy or in your early career, did you have any mentors or role models?

PECK: Well, in a way, Peter Bennett was my role model, because he saw the Academy [as a whole]. He was trying to break down its silos, [which present] a challenge we've had [through most of] our 200 years. There have always been silos. [Peter was initiating] projects that would involve as many different departments as possible, and he often would put me in charge of them.

I remember one of the first ones I did for him was called the Festival of Fishes. And although you might think that that was focused on the ichthyology department, it actually involved the library quite a bit because we pulled from the rare book collection and the archives wonderful illustrations of fish. It also involved [several] other departments that [study the organisms with which] fish interact.

Of course, the Patrick Center was all about water and [the critical role it plays in] the environment. [That involves fish.] The insect department [could explain the many] interactions between fish and insects. Ornithology [could do the same with birds,] and so on. [Peter's] goal, as he [described] it to me, was to […] incorporate as many of [the departments] as we could to make public programs that would [interest] the general public and make them understand the importance of fish [and the Academy's role in studying them from many points of view].

Slowly, and because of my background in art history and American history, I became kind of the de facto humanist on staff. We had, at that time, anywhere from 150 to 200

scientists working in all fields of natural history. My role was to put what they did into a cultural context through exhibits, articles, lectures, and books, and by working with the media, [advising on] documentary films, and so on. That is essentially the job that I've been doing ever since.

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FILIPOS: You mentioned earlier traveling and doing research on this trail. And then later in your career, you went on many expeditions that the Academy is known for. So, can you tell us a little bit about going on these expeditions, how you got involved in going on those?

PECK: Yes, that was one of the things I enjoyed the most, and still do—joining our scientists as they went off on their own [research] expeditions. The first one that I was invited to join came through the Explorers Club in New York. They were planning to do a trip to Bhutan, but, in the end, [because of political unrest in India, through which we would have had to access Bhutan, the destination] was switched to Nepal.

The royal Nepalese government had asked [for] help determining where commercial trekking [should] be allowed in the country. […] Bhutan had done a very good job of keeping tourism to a minimum, and thereby protecting their environment and their culture. Nepal was getting a bit overrun by tourists who wanted to come and see that beautiful country, [so they wanted to institute some of the same rules that had been so successful in Bhutan.]

So, they asked us if we could help determine which areas were too fragile or otherwise inappropriate for tourism. I was invited to join that trip, and again, Peter Bennett allowed me to go with the idea that the Academy should be involved in these international projects. It proved to be an amazing, wonderful experience. I [learned a lot and] had a great time.

[We walked for] 300 or 400 miles, trekking all around Annapurna and [up to elevations of over 20,000 feet]. I was with a team of botanists, [and a few others, including Barry Bishop from the National Geographic Society. He was one of the first Americans to climb Mount Everest.] There were two other people from the Academy: Clyde Golden and Richard Horowitz, who were both in the environmental studies department here. Rich was an ichthyologist, working with the Patrick Center, [and Clyde was in charge of the Patrick Center] at that time. Clyde, of course, later went on to do important work in Mongolia and I [worked with] him on those projects as well. [When] I got back from the trip [to Nepal], I began giving talks about it, [as I had been] the chronicler, photographer, historian of the

trip. The public responded well to those talks and to the articles I did about it for the [*Philadelphia Inquirer*] and for our own internal publications.

Then I began getting invitations from different departments within the Academy. They said, "Well, if you did that for them, why can't you do it for us? We would love to have you join us on a trip." [Of those subsequent trips,] the one that got [the most] attention was the [so called Cutucú Expedition] to Ecuador in 1983.

[The Cordillera de Cutucú is a mountain range, detached from the greater Andes, but related to it,] in a remote part of Ecuador along the Peruvian border. The trip was organized by the Ornithology Department. Bob Ridgely, [who was a curator there,] was then writing a book on the birds of South America. There was a whole area that was a blank spot on the map [ornithologically] that he wanted to get into to see what indigenous birds might be there that hadn't been described, or at least to inventory what was there.

We discovered the reason that it was a blank spot on the map was that this was an area controlled by the Shuar Indians. [They are] known to the outside world as the Jivaro, which [translates to] something like "wild ones", but they call themselves the Shuar, which is a more respectful name.

They are the [indigenous group] best known for their head shrinking. If you've ever seen a shrunken head in a museum, [say at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology] or elsewhere, it was almost certainly [created] by the Shuar. They were famous for that. And so, it was an area that people weren't keen to go into, and we weren't sure how we would get in either.

There was a Peace Corps volunteer [named Todd Miller] who was working in one of the villages right on the edge of the Jivaro/Shuar country and Bob Ridgely had been in touch with him. He could speak a little bit of their language. He agreed to accompany us as our interpreter. A team was put together from the Ornithology Department, [including Frank Gill, Bob Ridgely, Mark Robbins and [George] "Skip" Glen, and I was included]. The trip was one of the most memorable, most exciting expeditions I've ever been on. It resulted in my book [*Headhunters and Hummingbirds: An Expedition Into Ecuador* (1987)]. [It was given that title] because, sure enough, we did have our encounters with the Shuar.

They couldn't believe that we were there looking for birds. It was a very difficult area to get into, and we were working under extremely difficult conditions. They thought, "How could these people, these gringos, be here looking for birds? Clearly, they're looking for gold and other valuables. And if they ever find anything here, then others are going to come in and ruin our lives."

We learned part-way through the trip that there had been a hit order put out on the expedition, and we were all to be killed. In exchange for that, whoever did the job could

have our equipment, have our tents, and have what food there was, [etc]. This information reached us part-way through the trip, and some of the Shuar, who we had already hired as porters and guides to help us, abandoned us at the time.

We didn't know whether that was because they didn't want to get caught in the crossfire or whether they had joined the ones who were going to come in to get us later. It all became rather stressful. We moved our camp from one day to the next to avoid [being found.] One of us would stay up at night with a gun [as we had shotguns with us for collecting].

Anyway, we worked our way higher and higher into the mountains on the principle that it was colder and more difficult for the Shuar to get at us there. We had two exit plans. One would be to go back the way we came. The other would be to go over the mountains and down on the other side.

Our supply lines had been cut. The people from the colonial side of the border had disappeared with our animals and a lot of our food because they didn't want to get caught in this. So we were down to pretty basic survival food. We decided, in the end, to divide our group into two. Todd Miller, the Peace Corps volunteer, and I were going to go out first with one of our Shuar guides who said that he could take us on high hunting trails and away from the main paths where [the hostile Shuar would be looking for] us.

The other group would stay, [continuing to move higher in the Cutucú,] and then we would send a message back to them. If we got to the border safely and sent back a message with our guide saying everything was fine, then they would know it was safe to come [the same way with his help]. If [our guide] came back with no message from us, [no matter what he said,] that was not a good sign, [for it meant that he had] taken us into an ambush [and we had not survived].

It's a long story, which is all written up in in my book, [so I won't go into it here, except to say that] we did have some hazardous and harrowing experiences with the Shuar on the way out. [Fortunately,] we did eventually make it safely to the border and sent the message back [to our colleagues]. Todd [Miller] and I went with no guns because we [knew] that the guns were more valuable than anything else we had, and the Shuar might easily want to kill us just to get our guns. They [could easily have killed us] with blow guns and poison darts, so we'd never know what had hit us.

We [chose not to] carry guns, and I was relying on Todd to [serve as my interpreter] and talk for me if ever there was a problem, which there was. We had a particularly memorable encounter on the path toward the end of the hike out where [we encountered] three [young] Shuar men [probably in their 20s] coming toward us on the trail. [They were] quite surprised to see us. They were slightly drunk. They had been to some sort of a village

ceremony. They were all carrying machetes, and they started questioning us. Were we the gringos who were there looking for gold and other valuables? Were we the ones that they'd heard about? All the questions were directed at me because I was the older of the two [of us]. Our own Shuar guide had disappeared at the [critical] moment, so it was just the two of us and our three antagonists. I was trying to figure out what was going on, because I can't speak Shuar. So I was talking to Todd, and he would talk to them and relay their questions to me. Well, this they found very insulting, because they thought [that I thought that I was too important] to speak to them directly, which was slap in the face.

So they started getting more and more angry, and the leader of the group began slapping me on the chest with his machete with the point of it right at my throat. I thought, "This is not going well. We're going to have to work our way out of this some way." And so I said to Todd, "Can you tell him that I'm very sick and that I'm trying to get to the border so I can get to a doctor?"

I probably looked pretty sick because we hadn't eaten a lot for days, and we were [hiking through very mountainous, difficult territory,] mostly traveling at night. We would hide during the day and try to sleep and then [walk] at night, because the Shuar tend not to go out so much at night. This particular encounter occurred at the end of the afternoon, so we must have left earlier [than usual] that day.

Anyway, I said [to Todd,] "can you convey that message?" And he did. Fortunately, he had enough language skills that he could say [what I had suggested. The Shuar were distressed by that news] and stepped back a little. [And then I said to Todd,] "Can you tell them that what I have is very contagious?" That got their attention even more. They backed off and separated, and we walked [between] them and on down the trail. It was one of those [situations] that could have gone either way. I'm glad it worked out the way it did.

00:23:02

FILIPOS: Do you have a favorite place or experience, other than your life being threatened, or discovery that really sticks with you from any expedition?

PECK: Yes, well, on that Cutucú [Expedition], although it was primarily an ornithology trip, we were also collecting other things for the Academy, [including insects, a few mammals (mostly bats)], reptiles, and amphibians. [I helped with all of these, but I became] particularly focused on frogs [as I was the only one collecting them]. I would go out at night with my headlamp, where I could pick up the little eye sheens and reflections.

I collected as many [frogs] as I could, [about 25 different species in all]. It turned out when we got back [and the frogs were studied,] that three of them were new, undescribed species. […] Dr. William Duellman, [at the University of Kansas,] who is the world's authority on Amazonian frogs, described them [in the Academy's *Proceedings* (vol. 140, No.2, 1988)] and he very generously named one of them after me. So there's *Eleutherodactylus pecki,* or Peck's Peeper. It's a tiny little thing. It can sit on your fingernail, and it is still very rare. We hope it is still in existence, but there are only a few known specimens in any museums in the world […].

[Despite its hazards,] I enjoyed [the Cutucú trip very much]. I enjoyed all of my tropical trips. I did another one with the bird department to the [Las Lagunillas] Mountains in 1992. These are high elevation mountains, [also in Ecuador which had not been studied ornithologically before our trip there]. I love [all natural history, but I especially like] the birds. I'm a very enthusiastic birdwatcher still, thanks to my mother, and all the great colleagues I've had here at the museum. So I loved all of those [trips with the Bird Department.]

[Although they were not organized by the Ornithology Department,] the place I've spent the most amount of time on Academy expeditions is Mongolia. I did seven trips there, starting in 1994 and going as late as 2011. Some of [these trips were] with Clyde Goulden, who I mentioned earlier. We started by studying Lake Khövsgöl, which is a tectonic lake in the north-central part of Mongolia. It is very closely related to Lake Baikal. And in fact, it's the sister lake of Lake Baikal, which has one fifth of all the [unfrozen] fresh water on Earth, and is very well known and well-studied.

Lake Khövsgöl had not been well studied. From 1923 to 1990, Mongolia was under communist rule, and although it was an independent country nominally, it was essentially controlled by the Soviet Union, and so Americans weren't allowed in for research purposes. The last famous Mongolia trips had been run by the American Museum of Natural History back in the teens and early 20s. Roy Chapman Andrews discovered his dinosaur eggs there, and there were a number of other expeditions to the Gobi Desert.

But Lake Khövsgöl had not been studied by Westerners. There had been some Russian scientists there, but not much [work had been done there,] and so it wasn't nearly as well-known as Lake Baikal. We decided that that was an area worth studying, so we made multiple trips there. I enjoyed those [very much]. I also realized that Mongolia was a country that was about to go through very important and major changes. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Mongolian government, without its communist officials, [made lots of changes] and China began to have more influence. [After 1990, the politics and] the economics of the country began to change. I realized that the life of the nomads that we were introduced to on that first trip in 1994 was also going to be changing. And so I got

separate funding to go back and try to document that life as best I could, particularly photographically. The Trust for Mutual Understanding, which is a Rockefeller Foundation, gave me some money [for this purpose,] and a number of [individuals and] private foundations did as well.

[With this support,] I was able to go and live with the nomads, travel with the nomads, photograph them, and essentially make a record of how they lived. I am so glad that I did it when I did. Mongolia is a huge country. It's about the size of Western Europe. But at the time, it only had 2.5 million people in it, of whom about half lived in the capital of Ulaanbaatar. So when you are out in the country, you can drive for hours and hours and never see anybody.

Lake Khövsgöl was amazingly pristine, probably the most pristine lake in Asia. The water was crystal clear. You could drink it. You could see 30ft down to fish swimming below. There were two little villages at either end of the lake. The lake is about 100 miles long and maybe 30 miles wide. There was only one boat on that lake, [the Sukhbaatar, which served as] the Mongolian Navy. When we first went there in 1994, it was not operating because [the government] had no funding for the gasoline. They said that if we could get the funding, we could hire [the boat and its crew] and use them [for our research].

So that's exactly what we did. In [the summer of] 1995, we went back to [Lake Khövsgöl and used that ship] to go up and down the lake making water collections for the Patrick Center. Now, sadly, there's much more activity on the lake. It's become a tourist destination. There are commercial camps all along its [shoreline] which don't really have good sewage treatment [and are beginning to pollute the lake's once pristine waters]. There is also much more boat traffic there, so it has changed a lot. I'm glad I got to see it when I did.

00:28:48

FILIPOS: How do you see your own contributions at the Academy and in the wider scholarly and scientific community?

PECK: At the Academy, I've enjoyed working with all the different departments to advance their various projects, sometimes in the form of fundraising for them, sometimes by documenting their research, and acquiring collections. [I have done this] both for the library and archives and for individual scientific departments. To the outside world, [my contributions] have been mostly through my [lecturing and] writing. I do a lot of writing of

articles where I cross the line [between and/or] integrate science and art and social history. [I write for and] speak to audiences that might not be familiar with the other disciplines [or with the Academy and its work].

I write for *Natural History* magazine, [*National Wildlife*, *Audubon,* and others on a pretty regular basis. I'll write some] articles that have to do with cultural history, that also involve science and biology. [And I write for art] magazines like *Antiques*, or *American Art Review* and [other] cultural magazines. For them I write articles that talk about how science is incorporated into those disciplines.

It's the same with my lectures. When I attend conferences and speak on these topics, I find that that intersection is often quite interesting [to my audiences,] as it gives [them] a chance to think of things in new ways, different ways that they might not otherwise have thought of. I've been very lucky in that my academic training covered both of those fields and that here at the Academy, so many of those things cross over, overlap, and intersect.

00:30:48

FILIPOS: You mentioned getting different people involved in different disciplines. How do you connect the work at the Academy and the work that you have done with informing the general public about what's going on with your research and the research of the Academy?

PECK: Well, sometimes it's the outside world that has come to me. The press will often send in inquiries, either specifically to me based on something that they've read that I've written, or heard that I've spoken about, or more often, general inquiries come into the Academy and then they've been referred to me as the one to speak to, to try to explain what it is we do here and why we do it. The scientists, of course, are the experts in these fields, but they may not be as interested in, or comfortable speaking to [the press or] the public about it. And I quite enjoy that role. Also, speaking about it at members' events and public outreach education programs.

00:31:58

FILIPOS: Have you had a project here at the Academy that you've been the most passionate about?

PECK: Yes. Well, many of them. And some of the exhibits that I've organized, I've been very involved with and passionate about. One of the ones that I got involved with early on was the artwork of Louis Agassiz Fuertes, who was an American painter of birds in the very late 19th century and early 20th century. He died in 1927.

The Academy had an opportunity to acquire a large collection of his paintings, which were found in Washington. They'd been commissioned by the U.S. government back in the teens or even earlier, the very early 20th century and they'd been found at the Smithsonian. They were Fish and Wildlife Service commissions, but they'd just been kept in a vault [in D.C.] and nobody knew quite what to do with them. [Their discovery made national news.]

Various institutions were asked to apply if they [wished] to become the custodian of those collections. Well, Fuertes was someone I [already] admired enormously. Many people think, and I am one of them, that he was the best bird painter of the 20th century, and maybe not as well-known as he should be. He was well known in his day, [at least to those interested in birds]. He died in 1927—and he dominated the field for the [previous] 30 years—but he was not as well-known after that.

Anyway, I spoke to our administration about it, and they agreed that it would be worth trying. We were in competition against every other museum in the country: the American Museum, the Field Museum, and the Smithsonian itself. They all wanted it. But I put together the proposal and made the case that ornithology had had its start here in Philadelphia, and specifically at the Academy, with members like William Bartram and Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon and so on. And that our collections here were already very strong in that field. We knew how to care for original works of art. We had appropriate storage areas in the archive, and we also had the ability to make this material available to the public.

And, [happily,] for whatever reason, our proposal carried the day, much to my delight. And that collection came to us. My first way of fulfilling our promise was to organize a national traveling exhibition of this material, which involved not just what had come up from Washington, which was about 200 or so of his paintings, but also ones that I could borrow from other institutions.

To accompany it, I decided that I should write a book about Fuertes. There had been a short one, a kind of reminiscence that had been written by his daughter, who I got to know, and another [book] that had been written more as just a coffee table book. [It was very attractive,] but there was not much substance to it. So I went to meet his daughter [Mary Boynton]. She lived in Ithaca, New York. [She lived] in the house that Fuertes, her father, had lived in, and his studio was still there. [Interestingly,] she had been approached by Rachel Carson 10, 15, or 20 years before [who asked] if she could write a biography of

her father. And for whatever reason, they did not get on, and the daughter vetoed the project.

Our conversations went in a very different direction, and she and I got on well, and she said, not only would she allow the book to be written, but she would do everything she could to help me with it. And so she did. She had [many] wonderful family papers, drawings, and things that had not yet been given [to an institution.] They have since gone to Cornell's [Lab of Ornithology,] but at that time, they were still in her private hands. And so I worked closely with her and traveled to various other institutions that had Fuertes material and eventually produced a book, called *A Celebration of Birds: The Life and Art of Louis Agassiz Fuertes* [New York: Walker & Co., 1982], which accompanied the exhibition.

The exhibition opened at the Academy [in 1982,] and then it went on to the American Museum in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the New Britain Museum of Art in Connecticut, and the Telfair Academy of Science in Georgia—Savannah, Georgia. [It also went to] either Houston or Dallas, I think Dallas. Anyway, one of the Texas museums, and to the California Academy of Sciences. It was traveled under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, or SITES, as it was then known, and I got to travel with it and give the opening remarks at each of the venues.

[At that time,] Roger Tory Peterson was the best-known author of a bird guide [in the U.S.]. Now, it's David Sibley, but in that day, it was Roger Tory Peterson whose *Field Guide to the Birds*, first published in 1934, was the household [book on birds. He] was a huge fan of Fuertes. He attributed his own interest in birds and in painting [them] to Louis Agassiz Fuertes. So when I approached him about it, he agreed to write the introduction to my book, and he came [to the Academy] for the opening launch and to autograph copies of the book with me. He later joined me in Texas [to do the same thing] when the show traveled there.

So, Fuertes got a lot of attention through that exhibition and through that book and I had [a lot of] fun getting to know him through his papers. He's one of those people who's just eminently likable. I only wish I had known him personally, [although, in a way,] I felt as though I had known him just from all the things I read. I still work with his material to this day. When we had an exhibit a year ago called "Illuminating Birds" here in the Dietrich Gallery, we exhibited a number of Fuertes' paintings. I still give lectures about him. I was in Texas at a conference last year to speak about Fuertes. He's particularly popular there because he did a lot of work in Texas, particularly along the Mexican border. But I think his work […] will stand the test of time [and he will always be known as one of the best bird painters of all time].

00:38:48

FILIPOS: You talked a lot about writing different books and different articles. Can you talk to us a little bit about the experience of co-writing *A Glorious Enterprise,* [the Academy's bicentennial history book?]

PECK: Yes. We decided […] that if there was ever going to be a history of the Academy written, [2012] was the year to do it. We began talking about this [in 2009,] three years before [the bicentennial]. There was no funding available for it, unfortunately, so I […] found a donor, [a friend of mine, who generously agreed] to cover the [publication] costs [$100,000]. [It was published by] the University of Pennsylvania Press. It was a huge job. I knew 200 years would be more than I could handle in the course of the three years I had left [to write it]. Even though I'd been researching it for 30 years, it was just too daunting to write [by] myself.

Fortunately, Patsy McCurdy, or Patsy Stroud, as she called herself (Stroud was her earlier married name, and that's the name she used as her author's name)—she and I were friends. We'd known each other for a long time. She had, with me, edited *Frontiers* magazine [for the Academy between 1979] and 1982. [It later became a sort of newsletter for the Academy, but it was then a real] magazine with long articles [written by important authors]. Patsy and I had [enjoyed] working together on that. [I was the Managing Editor.]

Patsy had been chairman of the women's committee for the Academy, so she knew the Academy well. She had also written two [excellent] biographies of early Academy members, one on Thomas Say, one of our founders, and one on Charles Lucien Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon, who was an ornithologist [and ichthyologist and an active Academy member]. And so I knew she was very familiar with that early period [of the Academy] and with those [important] personalities. [And I knew she was a good writer.]

So I approached her about it and said, "would [you] consider co-authoring a book?" And she thought it sounded like a good idea. We got together once a week [for the full three years the book took to write]. We had a fixed schedule where she would come in every Tuesday, and we'd work together all day. We'd have lunch together and talk about [the project]. We would divvy up the chapters. We divided them evenly, and then we would research and write our chapters and then exchange them and edit each other, critique each other and so on, drawing attention to things that maybe one or the other of us had missed. She spent a lot of time working in the archives, as did I, and it was a very smooth, wonderful collaboration. We enjoyed it enormously.

I think Penn Press did a beautiful job with the design. I knew we wanted to use archival material to illustrate [the book,] but I thought if it was just archival, it would be a

little bit dull [visually,] and therefore, if we could get contemporary photographs of Academy specimens that had interesting stories and that paralleled the text, that would be the best of all worlds.

One photographer who I had long admired was Rosamond Purcell. She had done a number of books with Stephen Jay Gould at Harvard and several on her own. She is a brilliant, [world-class] photographer who specializes in scientific subjects. She does it in an unusual way in that she will not use artificial light. It's all done with natural light. And so [her photographs] have [an arresting,] very lifelike quality to them. Anyway, I approached her about it. I had worked with her on an earlier book, one about her work. She had invited me to be a writer for that, so I returned the request and [asked her] "would [you] consider coming down and taking pictures at the Academy?"

She was thrilled by the idea. These are just the kinds of subjects she loves. And since we got along well, that made it easy. I pre-selected most of the material, but then when she got here, I purposely selected more than we needed, so that she could then select from that which things interested her the most. And then we would find interesting places to photograph them. [We took] some [of the pictures] up on the roof, some out in the parking lot behind the Academy, some on windowsills in the building, in order to get different lighting conditions, working at different times of day, under different conditions of weather, etc. And I think she did a brilliant job with it. And [PennPress] did a very nice job laying out [the book, designing it, and printing it with high quality paper,] thanks to the funding we provided them to subsidize it.

00:43:36

FILIPOS: That was around the time of when the Academy was celebrating its bicentennial. Could you tell us a little bit about what that was like?

PECK: Well, it was a very interesting time in Academy history, because it was also the time that we were merging with Drexel University. George Gephart had recently become president of the Academy. He was told by the board and had suggested himself that we needed to find an academic partner. The [most obvious] choices we had [for this] were the University of Pennsylvania, Temple, or Drexel. It turns out that [George] had a previous relationship with John Fry, the [new] president of Drexel at the time, so they knew each other well. They trusted each other. There were other reasons why the other two institutions weren't quite as natural fit, although Penn would have been...we had a long history with Penn and overlapping, curatorial appointments.

But anyway, the relationship with Drexel began to take shape. So it was just coincidence that our 200-year history was coming to an end, as a new 200-year history was just beginning. [Fortunately, we were able to insert this historic development into *A Glorious Enterprise*] at the very last minute. [The book] had gone out to design. It was practically on the printing press at the time the merger occurred. We had just enough time to tweak a last sentence or so in the closing paragraphs about Drexel, and that brought it to a close. The bicentennial here involved a big exhibition of material drawn from all the different departments, a series of lectures, and a series of celebratory events.

[As important as our bicentennial was,] the merger was beginning to take most of the light at that time. I'm just so glad we were able to do the book when we did, because it was a good stopping point for that 200-year history. [The book has become the permanent record of our first two hundred years.]